



THE JOY OF CLASSICAL DANCES OF INDIA

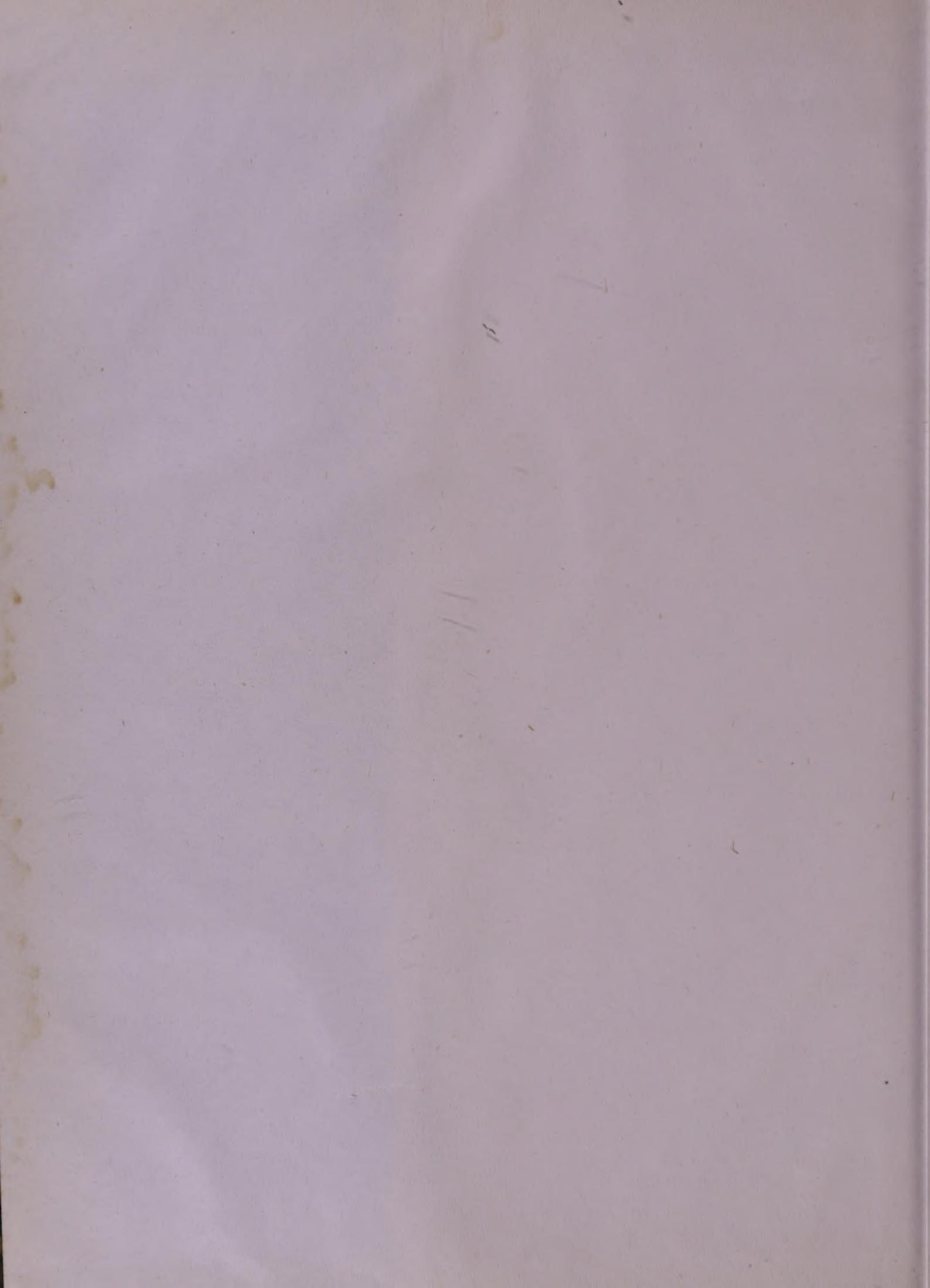
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HISTORY AND MYTH

History tells us that several centuries before the birth of Christ, India's art forms of dance, music and theatre were already highly developed. There was a glorious period, for instance, during the rule of the Chola dynasty in South India—rightly called the 'Golden Age', when all the arts flourished. Whether it was good governance at the village level, or the encouragement given to the living arts and sculpture, or the building of great temples—it all happened during the Chola period. The exquisite bronze statues of Nataraja and other deities



that you see in museums are from that period. Yet, the dance we see on stage today has a history of only fifty to eighty years! And several events happened before these became known as artistic treasures around the world.

When the British ruled our country, the temple was the centre of activity in a village and was for long, the only common place where the village community could meet. There were no halls, clubs or cinema theatres, as we have now. At this time, dancers performed in the temple. Although not from the *Brahmin* community, she and her musicians lived on temple lands and were employed by the temple. She performed on all festive occasions and had to be present for the daily rituals of the Lord. She was paid from temple funds and food grains for the dancers and their families came from temple lands. The community of musicians and dancers was a poor one. They were also what you might call 'schedule castes'. Perhaps in order to protect these families, there was a custom prevalent of her marrying the deity of the temple! This gave her dignity and payment for her work. As such, she was called a '*deva-daasi*' or servant of the God. This custom allowed her to come into the inner sanctum of the temple and to serve the deity regularly.

However, this custom was not to last long. The British who ruled us, were suspicious of our many customs and beliefs. They decided to ban all activities centred on the temple. On the other hand, our own leaders who were fighting for India's freedom felt that the custom of marrying girls to the deity needed to be abolished. This custom they felt, exploited young girls. And so, with one sweep of 'reform', an entire community of artists lost their livelihood. For by abolishing the *deva-daasi* system, their position in the village society was also dissolved. The community had no work, for where could they practice their art with such dignity and reverence?

In South India, the dancer moved from the temples to the homes of the rich landlord. Landowners and royalty were the only people who could afford to have the dancer come and perform for a marriage in the family or for the birth of a son! For instance, in the state of Mysore, the royal family understood the value of these old dance forms. They had performances of music and dance at all festive occasions in the state. In Kerala too, the rich landlords paid for Kathakali troupes to perform all night, near their homes. The people who lived around the area would all benefit from the performance and the art thus survived.

In the North, the story telling traditions and the *raas* were popular in the village and also in temples. However, apart from this, the dancer also moved into the courts of the Mughal Emperors and other Hindu Kings. Kathak for

instance, became a very popular form of entertainment. Many court dancers and, especially, musicians flourished during the Muslim rule and in several rich Hindu principalities. But soon, the Privy Purse of the Maharajas was also under strain and consequently their patronage to many artists of the time stopped.

At about this time, the highest caste—the *Brahmins*—had begun to take up the art of dance in the south. Before this happened, great stigma was attached to girls from good families witnessing, learning or performing the dance. Even in the fifties after our Independence, most people in India were prejudiced against dance. The educated class looked down upon both the dance and the dancer. Its beauty evaded them. They considered dance to be something that only ‘cheap’ women did. Women from their families would not be allowed to even see it!

Nevertheless, some western dancers began to show an interest in these traditional Indian dances. They began to use some basic Indian elements in their work. Besides, early black-and-white films that were being made in India also had folk and classical dance numbers. The charm of the temple was lost when this happened. But on the other hand, larger audiences were now able to see the dance. Today, people do not view what they see in the films as ‘classical dance’. They understand that it is different.

Whether classical, or folk or filmy—all Indian dances emerge from the very roots of India’s traditions. And at the root of India’s traditions lies its mythology. Mythology is a very important part of any civilization. Every nation has its own collection of stories and legends that are built around gods, goddesses and super-human beings. These stories become part of the beliefs of a nation. They are handed down from one generation to another. Many of these legends are man-made. They are an expression of man’s innermost dreams and fears. They underline a value, a thought, a belief. As ways of thinking change in society, myths also change. The great civilizations like the Greek, Egyptian, Chinese and Indian—all had a great wealth of myth. In America myth was created! Walt Disney’s characters have come to stay. So too, Batman and the strange characters in Star Wars.

In India, the stories are not only about gods. They are also about various kinds of spirits, sages, celestial musicians and dancers, demons, animals and birds—some mythical and others real. The stories tell of great forests and seas. They speak of universal phenomena like the planets, stars and the worlds beyond what the eye can see. The myths of India are something we can be proud of, because they tell ‘the story of life’ in the many worlds we live in. We live in the human world, in nature’s world, in the world of the stars,



constellations and planets, in the world of the gods and our beliefs, in the world of evil and our fears and the inner worlds of our dreams and of our desires.

To tell these stories is the delight of every stage actor, every dancer and every visual artist. Sculptors and architects, who built the temples that dot our land, decorated the walls of the temples with these legends. People who meditated in caves painted the walls of the caves with images. Painters, both Hindu and Muslim, made drawings that told the story of war and love in a single frame. Every classical dance form, every folk form, every dance-drama tradition and *jatra* or 'travelling' theatre group presents in various ways episodes from our ancient myth.

Not only actors and performers, but religious people as well, tell these stories in different ways. They speak to small village groups or, in religious festivals, to larger audiences. In this very 'real' world of computers and science, every generation and every nation has built up a world of 'myth'—filled with 'unreal' people and 'unreal' animals, which travel into 'unreal' lands and have 'unreal' experiences!

People say that the world of the stage is 'unreal'. Is the rest of the world 'real'?

THE THEORY OF INDIAN DANCE

The entire universe is Shiva's stage! The vigor of his dance makes the constellations move. Dance in India is said to have originated in Lord Shiva. When he dances he is called *Nataraja*—the Lord of Dance. It is said that when Shiva danced, the gods were delighted. They gathered around him and each of them offered to play an instrument or sing for his dance. Goddess Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning and Arts, played the Veena. Lord Indra, God of the Heavens, played the flute. Brahma, the Creator, played the cymbals. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, sang for him and Vishnu, the Protector, played the *mridanga*. The heavenly musicians and dancers, sages and other deities all came to watch Shiva and were awe-struck. The dance was joyous and was called the



'ananda tandava'. When Shiva later performed, it was in great anger at the burning grounds. He is then known as *Bhairava* and the dance is called the '*roudra tandava*'.

While Shiva danced the '*tandava*', Parvathi performed the '*lasya*'. These are the male and female aspects of Indian dance. The *tandava* is vigorous, energetic and bold. The *lasya* is graceful, gentle and feminine.

It is said that Brahma, the Creator, was disturbed by the turmoil that existed on earth. People were not happy. The *Brahmins* had kept the knowledge of the *Vedas* a closely guarded secret. They were exploiting the other communities. Brahma decided to remedy the situation. A dramatic and visual presentation of the texts would make it interesting even for uneducated, simple people. Soon, they became aware of the lessons contained in the holy scriptures. He taught this art of '*natya*' or drama, to a sage called Bharata. Bharata taught this wonderful art to his *ganas* or attendants and they performed it in front of Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva was so happy to see their dramatic performance, that he taught them his own vigorous dance, called *tandava*. Bharata then wrote a long thesis on the art of dance, drama and music, which is called the '*Natya-shastra*'. This *shastra* is a 'Bible' of information for dancers, musicians and actors on the method of performance on stage.



All classical dance forms in India have two main aspects. These are *nritta* and *nritya*. *Nritta* is pure dance. This means that it is 'movement' that has beauty, but does not tell a story. It is simply beautiful, graceful and energetic. *Nritya* on the other hand, is the art of story telling through *hastas* or gestures, movements and facial expression.

In some classical dance forms like Kathakali, from Kerala, the element of drama or *natya* is also there. The dancer is an actor in a play and he has make-up and costumes that tell you what his character is. He also has to do *nritta* and *nritya*. This was true of almost all the classical forms at one time. The Kuchipudi traditions were originally drama forms. From them, a solo form was created in the sixties. Bharata Natyam also had dance-drama traditions and these co-existed with the *deva-daasi* solo tradition. Manipuri is a *natya* or drama form. Odissi too had its origins in the *Jatra* parties that travelled across Orissa. These *nataka* groups performed with little boys dressed up as girls, who did Odissi-like movements. Their movements were more gymnastic though and they were called *gotipuas*.

It would be true to say that the dance forms of India are very different from one another. There is a lot that is not common among them. And yet, they are all based on certain common principles. Apart from the common elements of *nritta*, *nritya* and *natya* that we spoke of, there is also the element of *sahitya* or the lyrics. The dances are based on similar stories taken from the 'common pool' of our myth. But various poets, in different languages, wrote these. So, while the South Indian dance forms used verse written in the South Indian languages, the North Indian dances used the North Indian languages. Sanskrit was the only common language. While the poetry written in Sanskrit was truly great poetry and is being used a lot by dancers today, not much was written especially for dance, in Sanskrit.

Another element that all the dances use, is the *hasta mudras* or hand gestures. The dancer, to translate the *sahitya* or the verse into the visual language of the dance, uses these finger gestures. These gestures are common. Some styles use them more explicitly, while the others use them merely as a suggestion. For instance in Kathakali, the gestures are elaborate, while in Manipuri they are minimal. There are 28 single-hand gestures and there are 24 double-hand gestures. To say something, it is possible for the dancer to use two different single-hand gestures on each hand. For instance, she can say 'lotus-eyed' girl, by holding a 'lotus' in her left hand and showing the 'eye' in her right hand, at the same time. She can also use a double hand gesture, like when you say '*namaste*' where both hands are used simultaneously. A very beautiful *shloka* or verse advises the dancer on how to give life to these gestures.



"Where the hand goes, the eyes should follow,
Wherever the eyes go the mind and heart should follow,
Where the mind and heart are, there is true expression,
Where there is expression, there is enjoyment."

Indian dance forms specialise in *abhinaya*, the art of facial expression. *Abhinaya* may be either 'realistic' or 'stylistic'. When expression is 'realistic', it follows the normal pattern of human behavior. It imitates the way people behave and act, in everyday life. When expression is 'stylistic', it goes beyond everyday behavior and becomes a work of art. We believe that this is attractive to watch, even when the dancer is expressing negative feelings like anger, fear or hatred.

There are nine *rasas* or main sentiments in the art of expression. They are love, anger, laughter, compassion, valour, fear, disgust, wonder and peace. Many transitory or temporary feelings emerge from these main sentiments. Feelings are much smaller than sentiments. Of these nine sentiments, *shringara* or love is the dominant sentiment. All other sentiments emerge from *shringara* or merge into it. They are transitory sentiments and do not last as long as *shringara*. Even anger is most often a result of *shringara*.

The main body postures and feet positions of the various styles are different. Each style has positions that are typical to it. The dancer uses these when doing different movements. Every Indian dance form is done bare-footed and the stage is considered sacred. A dancer in India touches the floor of the stage in reverence, before she begins to dance.

Lastly, all the dance forms in India are accompanied by either one of the two classical streams of music prevalent in the country. The North Indian stream

of music is called the *Hindustani* form and the South Indian stream of music is called the *Carnatak* form. The concepts of *ragas* and *talas*, are common to not only musicians, but also to all the dancers and to their dance forms. So very basically, the *raga* is the ‘melodic’ structure of the song being presented and the *tala* is the ‘rhythmic’ structure of the song being presented. Both are vital to the song.

The poet writes the poem. The composer puts a tune to it. That is, he gives it a *raga* and a *tala*. The singer then sings it—giving it soul. The instrumentalists follow the singer or fill in the various gaps, giving the song larger body than its original tune. The drummer beats out the rhythm of the song. And the dancer uses her body, finger gestures and *abhinaya* or facial expression to tell the story in the poetry. This, then is the journey of the poet to dancer. Before it reaches an audience so many people have given it thought and feeling. Each in his or her way contributes to the final presentation on stage.

BHARATA NATYAM

The many beautiful traditions of the southern state of Tamil Nadu are visible in the dance form called *Bharata Natyam*. When you see this dance, you see the brilliant silk saris woven in the temple town of Kancheepuram. India is a country that can boast of several first-class weaving traditions. Yet, Tamil Nadu is known for its silk saris. The dancer wears these Kancheepuram saris when she does Bharata Naytam. One also sees the famous 'temple jewellery.' These are ruby-coloured stones set in different gold plated designs. This type of jewellery has adorned the deities in the temples of Tamil Nadu, for over a hundred years. One also hears the melodies of renowned South Indian composers. They wrote especially for dance in Telugu, Tamil and Kannada. These are the languages of the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively. Most of the really beautiful compositions were written in Telugu. These compositions are sung in the typical Carnatak or South Indian style of classical music. And of course, one hears and sees the instruments of the south—namely the *mridangam*, the flute, the *Saraswathi Veena* and the violin. To watch a dance recital, is to watch all these images simultaneously and to understand that they all come from an old and revered culture.

People generally believe that Bharata Natyam means 'Indian Dance.' This is incorrect. It is possible that it was named after the great sage Bharata, who wrote the *Natya-Shastra*. But what is most possible is that it stands for three vital organs of the dance, namely expression, melody and rhythm. 'Bha' stands for *bhava* or expression; 'Ra' for *raga* or melody and 'Ta' for *tala* or rhythmic cycles. Therefore, Bha-ra-ta *Natyam* is the dance of expression, melody and rhythm.

When you visit a temple in South India, you see many carved images on the walls of the '*gopuram*' or temple-tower. In some temples there are elaborate carvings on the walls inside, as well. These sculptures in stone tell the stories of many gods and goddesses. They are tales of war and valour, of love and marriages. And in all the temples, you will see 'celestial' musicians and dancers—called *gandharvas* and *apsaras*. It would seem that dance and music was central to the lives of not only the gods and goddesses, but also to those people who built these temples in earlier times.



Bharata Natyam is a sophisticated and energetic dance form. It is very precise. The basic postures of the style are 'balanced' positions. This means that the weight of the dancer is placed squarely down the centre of the body. It is not deflected and the hip is never used. A whole variety of movements can be seen in Bharata Natyam. There is an emphasis on the striking of the floor with the feet. There are jumps in the air. There are pirouettes as well, which are called *bhramaris*. And there are movements done with the knees making contact with the floor. These are called *mandi adavus*.

Bharata Natyam is a style that boasts of both strength and beauty. It has slow and fast passages. It has bright and dynamic movements of the body and hands. It is also quiet and reflective. It may be performed solo or as a group—with many dancers. The dance-drama traditions of Tamil Nadu are plays with dance and music. These dramas use elements of Bharata Natyam in their dramas. The pure dance or '*nritta*' and the expressive dance called '*nritya*' are part of



their acting techniques. These actors are well trained in these aspects of dance. These dance-dramas are called '*natakas*'.

The solo dancer also uses various methods of story telling to interpret the verses and stories she performs. Unlike the actors in the *natakas*, the soloist does not have costumes and make-up that are particular to certain characters. As a soloist, he or she has to act out all the characters in her stories with the same costume. Although the dancer's costume is beautiful, it does not help her much when depicting a poor, old man or an evil king like Ravana! The Bharata Natyam dancer, like solo dancers from other styles, has to break through the beauty of her costume and appearance, to interpret the various tales from our mythology.

The person who conducts the recital in Bharata Natyam is called the *nattuvanar*. In the early part of the last century and till about the seventies, this person was the 'guru' of the dancer. His role was not only to train the dancer, but also to conduct the recital and co-ordinate the different musicians. He himself played metal cymbals. This is called the *nattuvangam*. Although a *nattuvanar* still does the *nattuvangam* for a Bharata Natyam recital, he is no more the guru of the dancer. He is a musician like the others and does not have a special place among them. The other musicians are the vocalist, a *mridangist* or percussion player, a flutist, a violinist and a *veena* player.

The items in a traditional presentation of Bharata Natyam, were composed and designed by four brothers, known as the Tanjore Quartet. They were court

musicians in the palace of Thanjavur and were extremely talented in all aspects of music. The compositions they gave us are still used by dancers. A traditional set of items is:

1. *Alaripu* – an invocatory item, in which the dancer does simple pure dance movements. These are done as an offering to God, the *Guru* and to the *Sabha* or audience.
2. *Jatiswaram* – This is also a pure dance item with *swaras* or notes for the musical form.
3. *Shabdam* – As the name suggests it has ‘words’ or verse about a child god, like *Krishna* or *Muruga*. These verses are interpreted without elaboration by the dancer.
4. *Varnam* – This is the test of the dancer. It is the most elaborate composition in the dancers training. It has poetry that is interpreted with great elaboration. It has pure dance, set to *mridanga*, or drum syllables which are recited by the *nattuvanar*. It has *swaras* or notes to which the dancer does long, pure dance sequences.
5. *Padams* and *Javalis* – These are expressional dance pieces on love, set to beautiful verses.
6. *Kirtanam* – This is a lively composition that sometimes describes the dance of Shiva. It is a combination of movements and *abhinaya* or expression of the story.
7. *Tillana* – A very intricate pure dance item with a fast tempo and quick movements of the body.

To do these items on stage one after another, the dancer has to be well trained and proficient.

Bharata Natyam is like a diamond - it has many sides to it and each of these sides lends to its lustre. It has melody and rhythm, poetry and drama, expression and sculpture, colour and tradition. These aspects blend, to make it one of the most popular dance forms in the world today.

MANIPURI

Manipur is a green and fertile land, cradled by mountains. It is a remote state in the North East corner of India. The people of Manipur believe that music and dance are the finest and most natural ways of expressing themselves. Almost every occasion in their lives has a ritual of song and dance attached to it, which is in praise of god. The people are devotional by nature. They believe in myths and in legends. They also have a deep understanding of the philosophy of life.

The worship of Vishnu is vital to the people of Manipur. King Bhagya Chandra, one of their most enlightened kings, was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. During his reign, there was a resurgence of the arts in Manipur. Some



very glorious art traditions were established then. The art of *Manipuri*, was so much a part of the society's tradition, that even members of the royal family took part in these rituals. It was not unusual to see the Queen dance at the same venue as commoners. The people believed that dance and music were offerings. Position and caste were not barriers.

One of the oldest rituals in Manipur is called the *lai haraoba*. This ritual follows the process of creation. Several men and women called *maibas* and *maibis* first carry banners and offerings to the river. These men and women are the priests and priestesses of Manipur. The men wear white and the women pink striped clothes. They are knowledgeable in the scriptures. Offerings are made to the water, by dipping leaves in it and invoking energy from it. The dance is performed three times, from the river to the temple. In the days that follow, several rituals are performed. Dance and music play an important part in these rituals. All this is done to bring prosperity to the village and to the people.

The *sankirtan* is another very beautiful ceremonial dance in Manipur. Here, the story of Sri Krishna is told. The *sankirtan* has *ragas* and *talas* and also has *rasa*. Very simply put, *rasa* is the 'satisfaction' a dancer or musician seeks to find while performing. It is also the 'satisfaction' that a *rasika* or member of the



audience wishes to get while watching a dance presentation. The *Nata Sankirtan* is the singing and dancing in praise of *Hari* or Sri Krishna. Its performance is considered the highest form of worship. This Radha-Krishna legend is performed frequently in Manipur. Radha and Krishna are a symbol of the male and female forces in nature. Their union and creation are important for life on earth to continue.

The *raas-lila* is another dance tradition that recreates the life and deeds of Radha and Sri Krishna. Many of the *raas-lilas* are performed during particular seasons. The dancers in the *raas-lila* have elaborate costumes. It is performed in a *mandap*, which is an area marked for performance. This arena is created in every large local temple. The arena is decorated beautifully with green leaves, flowers and white cloth. Several singers and drummers play in the *raas*. The drummers play an instrument called the *pung*. The other drums in Manipur are the *dholak* or *dhol*, and the *khanjuri*. Two kinds of cymbals are used in Manipuri. These are called *kartaals* and *mandilas*. The *kartaal* is large in size and heavier than the *mandila*. Male dancers play the *kartaals*. The *mandilas* are used by the women and are smaller in size. The *guru* or teacher in Manipur is called





the *ojha*. He is respected by all. There are no formal schools of dance in Manipur. Children and professionals go to an *ojha* and learn from him in his house.

When you see Manipuri being performed, you will notice that the eyes of the dancer are never lifted up. This restraint is very beautiful and typical to this style. Even the movements of the dancer are controlled. They look easy, graceful and fluid. There are no sharp edges to the dance. Yet the dance is extremely vigorous, especially those performed by the male dancers. They play the drums and the large cymbals. The difference between the male and female dancers is very clear in Manipuri. The female dancer is very poised and gentle. The male dancer is powerful and energetic. But on the whole, the dance style of Manipuri is never aggressive or loud. Facial expression is minimal and

all movements are circular in form. They flow from one to another. The hands and wrists are used constantly. There is no end to any movement, thought or mood in Manipuri.

The costume of the Manipuri dancer is always simple, clean and elegant. Children wear pink with white sashes. The men wear pure white *dhoties* and turbans made of fine muslin. The female dancer wears an elaborate skirt either green or red in colour. White is a predominant colour in the presentations.

Two young children usually play the role of Sri Krishna and Radha. On the other hand, women, some of who are professional dancers, play the chief *sakhi* and the *gopis*. A *raas* usually begins in the evening and must end before dawn, the next morning. At the end of the nightlong *raas*, Sri Krishna asks the *gopis* to return to their respective homes as dawn is fast approaching. And they reply, " May we always be born as *gopis*!" This then, is the true sentiment of the *raas*. Every member of the audience—man or woman—feels the same way. Each of them wishes to be united with Sri Krishna. This is called *shingara-bhakti* or the devotion or *bhakti* we have for god, that comes from love or *shringaar*.

KATHAK

The whole world loves a story. And each person tells a story differently. From very early times, the enactment of a story has been a popular form of entertainment. The actor or performer uses several methods to do this. He perfects his skills—which includes recitation, singing, acting and dancing. In the classical dance forms, the dancer uses hand gestures. When these gestures developed over a period of time, they were called 'stylised'. This meant that although the gestures came from normal human behavior, yet over a period of time they took on the appearance of being slightly removed from it—a thing of beauty, something that has 'style'.

The professional storyteller in any country has a good knowledge of the epic tales and mythology of his own country. He also knows a lot about village legends, local beliefs and village customs. This helps him to feel the pulse of the people. To know what makes them happy, and what makes them cry; what touches their hearts and what it is, that makes them angry. The storyteller, who went from village to village, sitting under the shade of a large tree and gathering people to his side, was a clever actor. He would keep a whole village up all night, talking of kings and demons and of battles lost and won. He had no stage, no props, no lights. His clothes were old and torn. Yet with a scarf and a few bells around his ankle, he would act out a legend. He would make them cry or would bring a smile to their lips. To do this, the storyteller used words. He sang. He beat a rhythm out with his feet. He also used gestures and movements. And most powerful of all—he used 'facial expressions.' He who 'told a story' in this manner, was called a '*kathak*'.

A new manner of 'praying' swept across India in the 15th century AD. For the first time, ordinary men and women expressed their 'devotion' to god, through simple lyrics, group singing and dance. This was a very big change from the ritualistic practices of earlier times. Devotion to the legend of Radha-Krishna spread like a fire across the length and breadth of the land. This was called the *bhakti* movement. *Bhakti* literally means devotion. In Uttar Pradesh, in an area called 'Braj', the *raas-lila* developed. The *raas-lila* was a combination of music, dance and narration. Several people participated in it and the many



legends of Sri Krishna and Radha were enacted. Kathak was the style used by the *raas-lila* groups for the dance element in the presentation.

With the passing of time, the temple was not the only place for Kathak. When the Moghuls came to rule in North India, Kathak moved into the palace durbar. The Mughal emperors loved to be entertained with music and dance. The devotional lyric was replaced by very fast rhythm that was brilliant to watch. The expressive poetry was not devotional anymore. It was based on the theme of *shringaar* or love. In the 19th century, during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah of Avadh, Kathak flourished. Wajid Ali Shah was himself a poet, a dancer and a musician. It was during his reign that the Lucknow *gharana* or school of Kathak, was founded. The other well-known school of Kathak is the Jaipur *gharana*.

Kathak is the only classical dance style of North India. It was popular in Uttar Pradesh and from there, spread to Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Kashmir, Bihar and Gujarat. Generally speaking, the two or three schools of Kathak are not different. Their technique is the same. Only the manner of rendering



movements is different. The Jaipur *gharana* is known for its fast rhythms. The *gurus* of this style were all excellent *tabla* and *pakhawaj* players. They composed beautiful pieces of rhythmic verse, which they passed on to their students and children. These have been preserved by them and are performed by students of this style.

The Lucknow *gharana* on the other hand, is known for its grace, subtle *bhava* or expression and its sophisticated use of rhythm. The *gurus* of this school wrote beautiful verses. All these compositions are performed to this day. The Benares *gharana* executes movement in medium pace, with emphasis on precision and grace.

Pure dance or *nritta* is the hallmark of Kathak. Unlike other South Indian dance forms, the Kathak dancer does not open the knees outwards in a sitting position. The basic form is standing. Around the ankles of the dancer are tied numerous *ghungroos* or bells. The Kathak dancer is no less than a percussionist! She can produce numerous sounds with her feet. Some loud, some soft, some sharp. The speed is at times slow and at other times fast. Usually, the dancer recites a passage of *bols* or rhythmic syllables. Then, she performs it. These



recited and performed passages are called *tukdas*. These *tukdas* or *todas* are an important feature of this style.

The *chakkars* or whirling movements of Kathak make it a very attractive dance form. Another feature of Kathak is the amazing footwork. A third feature of the style is that the dancer speaks to the audience during a concert. This is done at regular intervals. She explains her moves. She also talks about the composer and her *guru*. She explains the verse or *sahitya*.

The instruments you see used in Kathak are the *tabla*, the *pakhawaj*, the *sitar* and the *saarangi*. When you watch a Kathak presentation and hear these beautiful instruments, you see Muslim-Hindu cultures in total blend. It is the only style of classical dance in India, which took from both these cultures successfully.

ODISSI

On the eastern coast of central India, is the state of Orissa. It is an area of many cultures. At various points in its history, several religions and philosophies swept over the State. The people of Orissa were influenced by these many faiths. Each of the religions built monuments to adore their Gods. As a result, the area is studded with old caves and temples. Early among these, are the *Jaina* cave temples of the 2nd century AD. These are called the *Ranigumpha* caves. The *Tantric* philosophy of the *Shaivas* also had a strong impact on the culture and arts of the area. The Shiva temples in Orissa have numerous very intricately carved images of *Nataraja* in dancing postures. After that in the 7th century AD, *Mahayana Buddhism* deeply influenced Orissa. And then in the 9th century AD, Shankaracharya—a Vedanta philosopher—came to Orissa.

When *Vaishnavism* came to Orissa, *Shaiva* rituals were not abandoned. Vishnu and Shiva were both adored. The favorite God of the people, however, is Lord Jagannath. His temple is in Puri. Every Oriya has a deep faith in this god. This belief in Lord Jagannath is a coming together of over fifteen different religious influences! What is wonderful, is that all this time the arts of dance and music were never forgotten.

The local people believe that Shiva and his son Ganesh taught dance to a beautiful *apsara* or heavenly dancer, called Manirambla. They also believe that



the sage Bharata taught the dance to a sage named Attahas, who taught it to the *maharis*—the temple dancers of Orissa. Orissa was then known as *Odhra desh*. Chodaganga was the name of the king who built the Jagannath temple in Puri. He adored the arts. He and other kings, who ruled Orissa around the 10th century, were themselves good dancers and musicians. They were called *nritya kesaris*. At this time, dancers served at the Jagannath temple in Puri. They were part of the ceremonies conducted every day. These temple dancers were called *maharis*. Singers and instrumentalists were also employed in the temple.

The people of Orissa love a beautiful Sanskrit poem, called the *Gita-Govind*. A poet called Jayadeva wrote it. His wife Padmavathi was a dancer. The poem is about the love that Radha, the heroine, has for Sri Krishna and her ultimate desire to be united with him. Jayadeva's devotion for Lord Krishna, about whom he writes, is felt in every line of the *Gita-Govind*. This poetry affected the music and dance of Orissa. In fact, only verses from this poem were permitted to be performed in front of the deity, in the temple of Puri.



There were three kinds of dancers in Orissa. One, were the *maharis* who danced in the temples. Only they were permitted into the inner shrine to be before the deity. Two, were the *nachunis* who danced in the royal court. And three, were the *gotipuas* who performed before the public. Interestingly, these *gotipuas*, were little boys who were trained in gymnastics in *akhadas* or gyms. They did difficult gymnastic poses. They were dressed up as girls. Rich landlords supported the different groups of *gotipuas* and they travelled all over the state in *jatra* parties. A *jatra* party was a troupe of performers who went from one place to another entertaining the people.

But soon, the *maharis* who danced in the temple faded out of the picture. Then, by the 19th century the *nachunis* also disappeared. We were fighting for our independence from British rule. The British did not understand these customs. India was also seeking progress and looking towards the West for a more universal education pattern. This resulted in some intolerance for old systems and those that held back society, especially women. However, the *gotipua* community survived. And it was from this community, that the return of Odissi as a dance form took place. They had a system of training and items. And although it is rare to see the original *gotipua* dances now, the style you do see and recognise as Odissi is based on that system.

The people who revived the dying art of Odissi, put it together by looking closely at the sculptures carved on the walls of the temples in Orissa, by looking



at some old texts like the *Abhinaya Chandrika* and lastly, by the technique used by the little *gotipua* boys. Odissi emerged as a very lyrical, 'sculpturesque' dance style. The postures in Odissi are pictures that convey meaning. The torso movement is special to this style and three bends of the bodyline are a mark of beauty. The basic *chowka* position is square in form and is a half-fitting position used constantly by the dancer. Sometimes the movements of the dancer look like waves of water. The spiral movements give the style its lyrical quality.

The instruments used in Odissi are the *mardala*—a drum, the *manjira* or cymbals, the violinist and flutist. The dancer wears typical Oriya saris and beautiful silver jewellery.





The items you see today are the *batu*—which is made up of sculptural poses. These poses are to be seen in the temple sculptures. Next, is the *pallavi*, which is 'bringing to life' of the swaras or notes in the music. When an Odissi dancer does a *pallavi*, you can actually 'see' the music with your eyes! Every musical pattern is made 'visual'. The *ashtapadi* is a must in an Odissi performance. These are verses from the *Gita-Govind*—the love poem of Jayadeva. *Moksha* is a concluding item and here the dancer pays homage to god, to the *guru* and to the *sabha* or audience, before ending her programme.

KUCHIPUDI, MOHINI-ATTAM AND SATTRIYA



The exciting dance form called Kuchipudi, hails from a little village by that name, in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Kuchipudi is based on stories from the *Puranas* and like Kathakali in Kerala, is a form of dance-drama. This means that the actor is required to sing, dance and deliver dialogue. He is the

complete actor. This form is still prevalent. But in the sixties, several leading dancers from the village of Kuchipudi came to Chennai and began to teach and perform Kuchipudi there. A new solo format developed as a result of the changing times. This solo Kuchipudi is what you now see. In this new form the dancer takes only parts of the original for enactment. These bits are from the traditional dramas and are in their own way dramatic. Apart from that a new repertoire has also come into play.

In Kuchipudi dramas, the male dancers impersonate the female characters. No women were permitted to take part in these dance dramas. Many male dancers in Andhra Pradesh and also in Kerala, became well known for the manner in which they impersonated the female character. Even when times changed and more and more women began to dance on stage, people still wished to see the male dancer doing female roles! They became legendary masters of female impersonation.



Apart from the male dancers who impersonated women and performed in these travelling parties, there was also a parallel tradition of female dancers. These were the *deva-daasis* or temple dancers. They had their own tradition of dance and music, quite different from that being done by the male Kuchipudi dancers. These dancers were more like the *deva-daasis* found in the temples of Tamil Nadu and the *maharis* who performed in the temple of Lord Jagannath in Orissa. *Abhinaya*—the art of expressing a theme—was what these *deva-daasis* were well known for. The *abhinaya* based itself usually on the theme of love. The *padams* and *javalis* are pieces of verse written by well-known poets of the time, precisely for such expressive dance. This is a rare thing to see even to this day.



Mohini-Attam is the dance of the woman, in Kerala. Women were never allowed to perform Kathakali, the vigorous male dance-drama form. Similarly, Mohini-Attam is never performed by men. Legend has it that Mohini was the form which Lord Vishnu took to mesmerize the *asuras* or demons. At the time of the churning of the milky ocean, the gods or *devas* and the demons or *asuras* all busied themselves with the churning, hopeful of many beautiful rewards. They all wished to have the secret potion that would make them live forever!

From the churning fourteen gems emerged. The gods and the demons all rushed towards the bowl of nectar. In the scuffle the demons seized the bowl of nectar and ran away with it. Then they began to fight among themselves! It is said that, suddenly there appeared from nowhere, a woman of extraordinary beauty! Her face was like a lotus and she was adorned with radiant jewellery.

She smiled at the *asuras* and asked them to hand her the bowl. The demons were so mesmerized by her that they forgot the nectar and gave her the bowl. She promised to distribute the nectar equally among them and the gods. The enchantress made the demons sit in one row on one side and the gods in another row on the other side. Then she began to give a portion of it to each of the Gods. Whenever she came to the demons she pretended to pour the nectar into their outstretched palms, but in fact never gave them a drop! As swiftly as she had appeared, she also disappeared. It was none other than Vishnu himself. It is this *Mohini* that the female dancer in Kerala gets her name from.

The *Mohini-Attam* dancer wears a white sari with a resplendent gold border. She has her hair in a knot on the side of her head. At all festive occasions in Kerala, it is customary to have this dance performed by young girls. They usually perform in a circle and do simple movements while they sing. The style is lyrical and very graceful. It has no harsh movements and is not dramatic like *Kathakali*. The costume and make-up is also simple, not as elaborate as that of the male dancer. The *Mohini-Attam* dancer uses gestures similar to those used by the *Kathakali* dancer, but not in such an elaborate way. The drums used for *Mohini-Attam* are the *edakka* and the *maddalam*. These are also used in *Kathakali*.

Sattriya, yet an unknown form of Indian classical dance, comes from the beautiful state of Assam, in the North-East. Its origin is attributed to Srimant Sankaradeva, the man who gave the 'bhakti movement' to the Assamese people. He was a poet, playwright and artist. He brought about a cultural reformation in the state, nearly five centuries ago. He created what are called 'Sattras'—places where devotees and monks could practise and study his teachings. Chief among his disciples was Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva created dramas, not unlike the 'raas' performed in the neighbouring area of Manipur, where too 'bhakti' was a dominant feeling in the common man's expression to God. The dramas contained poetry music, dance drama and stage craft. They were meant to uplift the viewer and take him through the beautiful expressions of bhakti or devotion, through the poetry music and movement enacted on stage. These were performed in the temples and were exclusively Vaishnav. Both Sankaradeva and his disciple, Madhavadeva wrote twelve 'ankiya bhaonas', or Vaishnav dramas. The 'sutradhar' or narrator is an important part of the enactment of the drama. Bhakti is the main rasa in these enactments and divine characters appear behind a curtain, much like the *Kathakali* tradition of Kerala and the Mellattur, Bhagavata traditions. The hundreds of 'sattras' and 'naamghar's' that dot the state of Assam, are venues for the enactment of these dramas. They used to receive royal patronage.

Now, Sattriya seeks freedom from being performed only by men in groups. Solo formats for modern presentations are necessary, in order to bring the art tradition out of its religious precincts and onto modern proscenium stages. The challenge will be to retain its devotional nature and yet develop its scope for modern audiences. It will have to reflect all the colours of human behaviour and experience.

KATHAKALI AND CHHAU

As night begins to fall in the southern state of Kerala, drums begin to roll. Very soon children, old women, young men, labourers and landlords are all drawn to the rhythm and sound of that call. They know what it means and excitement fills the air. They flock in one place to witness the dance called Kathakali. The drums tell them that the night will be a long one.



Katha means a story and *kali* is play. This is the traditional dance drama of Kerala—a respected, loved and living art. In these plays, men are not mortals, but demons of great strength and the great gods fight with them! It is the art of make-belief. Masks hide the actors, so that no one recognises who they really are. Huge circular crowns sit on their heads, making them two feet taller. They become giants towering over their audience, who are squatting on the floor. And the drums keep up their endless roll, breaking the silence for at least a few villages around.

Of the masked dance forms in India, Kathakali is the most vibrant and the most intricate one. However in Kathakali, the mask of the dancer is not a separate thing to be placed on the face of the dancer, as in Chhau. It is put on layer by layer with a myriad colours—each colour representative of a different character—good, bad, evil, woman, hunter, god, demon, snake or monkey. Beards of various colours and length get attached to the face. Even little white



beard-like frames hug the chin or nose or cheeks of the dancer. These white beards are made of fine paper, stuck onto a paste of rice, that lines the bones of the cheek. The men have painted lips, pink and powdery. They have blobs on their noses that tell you whether they will betray their friend or not. Skirts sitting on layers of buckram span out of the dancers' frame. And gold jewellery—larger than you have ever seen make for earrings, bangles, chest plates and armbands.

This then is the magical world of the art of Kathakali. Always supported by local kings and landed aristocracy, this art form grew from strength to strength. The Kathakali troupes became famed for their presentation of epic tales, taken from the *Puranas*. It is only when the princely families died out that



Kathakali saw bad days. When that happened, then in 1930, the poet Vallathol Narayana Menon saved the art. He established a wonderful school for training and performing Kathakali, in a place called Shoranur. This was called the 'Kalamandalam'. Old and respected teachers, known as '*ashaans*' were brought to Kalamandalam to teach their art to younger generations. Kathakali was kept alive and because of that it continues to attract people around the world.

Kathakali uses elaborate hand gestures and very formalised facial expressions. In the other dance forms of India, much depends upon how much a dancer 'feels' and is able to communicate to her audience. To 'feel' is not enough in Kathakali. You have to do numerous little things with the muscles of the face that are prescribed for the enactment of each feeling. This has to be learnt and practiced for hours at the feet of the *ashaan*. On stage, two male



singers sing the *sahitya* or verses, alternatively. The dancer, who knows the lyrics, has to first interpret them literally—word for word. Then he begins to create a drama of fantasy around the words. He moves into other spaces. He travels to other worlds—forests, mountains, to *bhulokam*—the world of evil—and to *swarga*—the world of the gods. Most of all he goes into himself—into the inner world, the world of one's imagination.

Kathakali uses two main drums—the *chenda* and the *maddalam*. They are large and heavy and are carried by the musician, tied around the waist. It is a difficult art, the art of drumming. The drummer has a long and painful learning period under a strict guru. When a female character appears on stage, then the larger and louder *chenda* is replaced by the smaller and sweeter *edakka*. There are also two singers and in each of their hands are cymbals that maintain the beats of the *tala*. One singer holds the *chengala*, which is a flat metallic gong, and is beaten by a wooden stick. The other singer holds two large cymbals called the *ilat-taalam*.

Kathakali was always performed at night, sometimes in the open, in very small spaces. A stool and a small curtain called a *therashila*, are the only props required in Kathakali. This curtain is used to bring a new character into the ‘playing field’. He hides behind the curtain held by two men and even dances behind it, making strange sounds and calls. This raises the expectancy and curiosity of the audience. Then with the drums rising to a high pitch, one of the men holding the curtain pulls it away from the other, revealing the new character to the audience with a flourish! The only light used in this dance-drama comes from a large lamp that is placed ceremoniously in the centre of the area, in front of the actors. Its flickering light casts shadows on the painted faces of the actors, making the art more magical.

Chhau is the other well-known masked dance of India. In this style, the dancers use real masks. Chhau has its origins in the martial art forms of Eastern India. The dance form called Chhau, grew branches in three different places. One form called Mayurbhanj Chhau developed in a place called Mayurbhanj, in Orissa; the other called Seraikela Chhau, in the area of Seraikela, in Bihar; and a third called Purulia Chhau, in Purulia, in West Bengal. These styles were named after the regions from which they came.

Mayurbhanj Chhau does not use masks. It is performed traditionally by men and related to the Shiva cult, in the Baripada District of Orissa. In this form, the dancers use movements that require a high degree of control, balance and skill. It raises the legs to the level of the chest, rotating it around the body, while the dancer stands balanced on the other leg. It is a difficult style.

Seraikela Chhau is performed with very pretty masks. The dances centre round themes like the night, the moon, the sun and so on. It is an extremely lyrical style of dance, almost feminine.

Purulia Chhau is a vigorous, manly form of dance, performed with very elaborate masks and headgear. It requires the dancer to do leaps in the air, summersaults, and twirls—again and again. The stamina and technique required to do this is quite amazing. Here too, the dancers are all male. The actors take

on the character of mythological heroes and heroines, like Durga, Ganesha, Shiva, Kartikeya and so on.

The dances of India are different from each other and yet similar. They hold on to the particular character of the region from which they come. Yet they have a pan-Indian character that makes them acceptable to every Indian. We are the proud inheritors of these beautiful traditions. They belong to each of us, to cherish and enjoy. They must be handed to every coming generation for their enjoyment and pleasure too. To do this we have to preserve them, like we must preserve the environment. We have to keep them pure and authentic to their individual natures. These songs and dances are the true wealth of our country. They come from the imagination of many generations of wonderful poets, singers and dancers who are no more. They are there for us to see and hear, because of their dedication. It is these practitioners who spent their whole lives, lovingly preserving these forms. It is the art of a country that makes it different from another. It is our culture.











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